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Time to draw a line in the same place for everyone

It has become a familiar story to country dwellers from south Somerset to north Wiltshire – on Friday morning a field is green, by Monday afternoon, it is filled with hard standing and caravans.

The issue of gipsies and planning is a complex one with its roots in the undoubted mistreatment of the travelling community by Government and society stretching back decades.

The antipathy towards gipsies continues today – witness the marches and campaigning against the plans for three towns in north Wiltshire to host official sites.

Those plans were dropped like a stone in the face of those protests, and that was enough of a signal to gipsies from all over to come to the county, where precedence has now decreed they will be allowed to stay because there are not enough official sites.

Through all this, it is important not to forget that gipsies are real people with children. Just like, in fact, organic farmer Tina Johnston, who was denied the right to live in a caravan on her own land earlier this month by the same planners who will decide on this latest gipsy site.

Tina was told she would have probably got permission to stay if she had been able to prove some Romany heritage.

No one can deny there is one rule for one and one rule for another. In this very same beautiful corner of the West Country, there are non-gipsies living in caravans illegally, being hounded out by the same dogged planners who are reminded by the Government that gipsies have been told to solve their own site problems by buying land themselves, which is what the quick-working Irish gipsies at Hullavington have done.

Let them stay, by all means, but let Tina Johnston and the rest of the 'settled' population stay too, or draw the line somewhere.

And if the Government and planners do draw the line – then it has to be in the same place for everyone, gipsy, organic farmer, non-gipsy alike.